

The quirks and dynamics of small town Vermont

"The Wizard of Odd: A Vermont Tale of Community Devotion"

by Gary K. Meffe

Green Place Books, 2019

Kate Odderton Langford has just inherited the Odderton Country Store from the grandfather who raised her. The store has been the focal point of its Northeast Kingdom village for 136 years, a

place where everybody comes to stock up on wine, beer, groceries, breakfast, lunch, and gossip. Kate, recently divorced and returned from a career in landscape and interior design in Boston, is happy to become the store's sixth-generation owner. But she is *not* happy to find that her grandfather forgot to tell

her about the substantial loan he took on five years previously to replace the store's crumbling foundations. Unsurprisingly, the bank has not forgotten the loan; the payment is due in full in 16 months. Kate, whose total assets comprise \$4,000 in savings and a 15-year-old car, gamely takes over running the store, but wonders how the debt can possibly be paid.

The answer lies in the book's subtitle; the book is a portrait of a community that would border on the sentimental if the characters weren't so much fun. There are the Odd Balls, a group of mostly elderly men who meet for breakfast every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Among these are three Korean War veterans,

a strong-smelling pig farmer, and a younger organic farmer. They have a wide variety of social views – thus allowing Meffe to insert lengthy political dialogues into his story – but they all agree on one thing: the store must remain open. There is Billy Wilson, the junior mechanic in the village's one garage, a lover of fly fishing and NASCAR. There's Caleb Smith, the village postmaster and tactful selectboard chair; and there's Charlie Harbrough, so famous for his

curmudgeonly obstruction at open selectboard meetings and his unfriendly comments elsewhere that everybody has taken to calling him Charlie Horrible. Above all, there is Jim Wilson, the widowed, retired professor of ecology, known to all the locals as The Wizard of Odd. Jim has come to town only recently,

driven by his wife's death to leave the house and college town where they had lived for years and find some other place with no memories. He is much respected; his lectures on climate change and lifespans stimulate interest not just in the high school senior who waits tables for Kate, but in the intelligent but unsophisticated older villagers. He also actively engages the town in helping Kate pay off her debt by organizing auctions and raffles. In the process, he and she become close friends.

This is hardly a tale of high finance. The debt which Odderton unites to help Kate pay off is for \$116,000.

That's an unimaginable sum in a village where everybody is getting by, but



One-Minute Book Reviews

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vulnerable to accidents like the loss of a family member, an injury, a falling tree limb, or – collectively – a failing squad car for the only village policeman. Odderton's residents look like easy prey to an insurance company that cleverly limits coverage, or to the wealthy developer who, informed by the bank of Kate's debt, offers to buy the store as the beginning of a project of developing the town.

But the people of Odd-

erton know who they are – Vermonters – and what's important to them—community. A close reader may notice that Odderton's continued community depends on the educated help of Kate and Jim, but the two of them are different from the others only in their articulate understanding of what is important to all.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels are set on Boyd Hill Road.